

AN EXTRACT FROM THE DIARY OF KATHERINE PLYMLEY (1758-1829)

By ROBERT MAYS*

The late P. B. M. Allan whose entertaining book *Leaves from a Moth-Hunter's Note Book* was posthumously published in 1980 recalled in that volume how many years earlier he had visited a country-house in Shropshire, when endeavouring to solve the mystery of the appearances of *Iphiclides podalirius* Scop., the scarce swallowtail butterfly, which were recorded in that county early last century. His welcome reception gave him the opportunity of consulting the diaries of Mistress Katherine Plymley, which are now deposited, together with a large collection of the related Corbett family papers, in the County Record Office (Ref SRO 567). A lepidopterist of no mean order, Katherine Plymley (1758 - 1829), was responsible, in addition to her remarkable diaries which spanned over 30 years, for a number of memoirs and notebooks, one of which contains her account of the successful rearing of the death's head hawk moth, in the year 1806; it is given below, by kind permission of Charles E. Corbett. It is as she wrote it, except that it has been broken into paragraphs for easier reading.

“DEATHS HEAD MOTH

Sphinx Atropos

The first time I ever saw the caterpillar was in 1801, it was sent from Ludlow ready to go into mold. Upon examination long after it was found not to have formed its chrysalis — In 1803 we had two chrysalis's sent us by Dr. DuGard, these (following the directions in a work on Entomology) were kept in a damp place, but, though fine chrysalises, they did not come out — In 1804 we had four caterpillars sent us; one from near Frodesly, one from Acton Burnel, one from Shrewsbury and one from Ludlow, three of these made fine chrysalises. Having experienced the bad effect of damp, (for those kept damp became mouldy) we kept these in the room we constantly sat in, but they did not come out.

In 1806 Mifs Adams sent us one ready to go into mold, it came three miles beyond Shrewsbury — this was the 11th of August, it went into mold immediately — In a German work Jane had read an account of the manner in which Schroeter the Deacon of Weimar treated these caterpillars successfully, and we determined to follow his directions exactly — When it had been a fortnight under mold it was taken out and found a very fine lively chrysalis, it was placed upon light mold and sand in a box covered only with muslin, and kept in a warm south room, where the sun occasionally shone upon

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it. It was observed to turn at least once a day, lying alternately upon its back and its face. When the weather became cooler, it was placed at night in a wardrobe that joined the kitchen chimney, and in the day moved about to let the sun shine upon it as long as it could. It was always observed to be particularly lively upon being first placed in a morning in the sun, turning often round and round several times and in different directions. It became gradually darker.

When we began to have fires in our parlour, which, being a fine season, was not till the 11th of October, we placed it upon the table by us when the sun did not shine, otherwise it seemed best in the sun. On the 26th of October it changed colour very remarkably, it had become very dark, though in the rings, at times particularly it had a rich yellow brown. On this day the colour tho' still dark appeared very rich; it had for some days before appeared very lively, now it was more still, and at night alarmed us with the appearance of being shrunk and dented, in the part covering the wings particularly; it afterwards turned and looked better.

The following morning it was free from dents, looked uncommonly well, and the colour, though dark, very rich. Over all those parts which were to be yellow in the Moth it was of a glowing red brown. It was very lively, turning itself often — the day was fine and we kept it constantly in the sun; in the course of the day we heard distinctly, two or three times, a faint sound like the chrysalis cracking the part covering the wings, dented in and out at times with a pulse like motion, and at times it trembled. Schroeter had observed that all his Moths came out between the hours of four and seven in the evening, which he looked upon as a fine provision of nature, for as these Moths fly in the twilight of the evening and morning, they had the night to rest and dry their wings and were ready for their flight next morning.

After sunset we kept ours upon the table by us. My Sister, Jane, Waties and myself had all the pleasure to see the Moth burst its chrysalis; it crack'd in an instant, louder than we had before heard it, and the legs appeared struggling for freedom, in less than a minute it was entirely disengaged. It was lying upon its back when the legs first appeared, and when its head was first seen part of the chrysalis was like a mask upon its face, upon turning round to creep out this fell off, and we saw it would be a most perfect Moth, the wings were then of course wet and folded up. This was a little before 7 o'clock in the evening. We immediately put it in a large bandbox and covered it up, making air holes in the lid. Looking at it about an hour after, it had crept up the side of the box and its wings were much lengthened.

The next morning we found it in high perfection and very still — I made a painting of it in its closed state that day, it remaining perfectly quiet wherever I placed it — At night we returned it to its

box and put a nosegay into it of such flowers as we thought had most honey and were then to be met with; particularly the Alpine Coltsfoot which attracts Flies and Butterflies, but the next morning it appeared to have been quite stationary and not to have gone to the flowers.

I was now to paint it flying, and having finished the upper wings it became necessary for me gently to put them open to see the body and underwings. We were apprised that when taken this Moth made a noise by the means, as it is said, of striking the tongue against the palpi, we were therefore prepared to hear it, as we supposed the disturbing it, however gently, would produce it — in fact it did, it resembled the softest chirp of a bird — we heard it often, as every time I had occasion to move it, it generally gave its chirp, when it had moved more, and was become in a degree restless, it ceased to make it.

It was however generally very quiet; once or twice it fled a little about the room and came against my check with such strength as to give rather a smart blow — at night it was again put into its box and remained still as before — The next day it was carried in a band-box to Shrewsbury as Mrs. P. Windsor had requested to see it and I thought Dr. DuGard would be gratified by a sight of it and I wished Miss Adams to see what the Caterpillar had produced — I sent it by our servant on foot — He brought it back in the evening not in the least injured by its journey — It had before paid a visit to the Hall and been seen by the family, it now went again for the servants to see it.

We brought it back, and towards twilight we turned it out in our kitchen garden, and had the pleasure to see it take its flight with great vigour — We soon lost sight of it as it flew to the grove”.

NOTES ON REARING THE COMMON BLUE BUTTERFLY (*POLYOMMATUS ICARUS* ROTT.) — In early April, I received a gift of six larvae from eggs laid by a female *P. icarus* f. *caerulescens* Wheeler. The larvae were feeding on *Lotus corniculatus* (bird's-foot trefoil). Drought and high temperatures had dried up all the food-plant — the donor of the larvae was feeding his on fresh pods of *Lotus edulis*, but as this plant was not available to me I tried fresh, tender examples of broad bean, *Vicia faba*. By removing the skin and splitting the bean, the young larvae were able to feed on the tender flesh of the bean. As they grew, they were able to bore into whole beans.

All the larvae pupated successfully, producing one male and five female f. *caerulescens*. This useful technique of using solid food may have wider application when breeding some of our butterflies. ANTHONY VALLETTA 257 M'sida Street, B'Kara, Malta.